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# SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1885.

## THE USE OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY.

It is almost impossible to set down in exact terms the advantages which follow the establishment of any institution of learning,—a college, a university, or a learned society. It is easy to point to illustrious men who have been developed in such fellowship, and just as easy to name those of equal distinction who were not so enrolled. The publications of the body do not necessarily afford any surer evidence of the advantages of association. In the case of the French academy, it is easy to show how its plan and its methods have been approved under the most diverse forms of civil government, in generations far remote from one another, and in foreign countries as well as at home; but no analysis can be so thorough as to say what French literature would have been without the academy. The perpetuity of an institution, when it might easily be given up, is a good sign of its appreciation at home; and the imitation of its modes of procedure abroad is evidence of impartial and disinterested approbation. The French academy has both these marks of success.

There are also other modes of judging its work. The prime object of the foundation, it will be remembered, was the improvement of the French language; and, to promote this object, four specific duties were imposed upon the society: the preparation of a dictionary, and of treatises upon grammar, rhetoric, and poetry. The rhetoric and poetry were never composed, perhaps,—as an early historian, the abbé d'Olivet, intimates,—because a very little reflection would convince such a company of writers as the academicians, that there is nothing peculiar in the principles which govern literary expression in the French language. The arts of literature are as universal as the arts of cultivated speech; and the academy, from the study of Sophocles and Æschylus, Cicero and Virgil, Dante and Petrarch, Shakespeare and Spenser, could derive lessons quite as good as those which it might gain from the study of the poets and orators of France. Not so with the grammar and vocabulary of the French language. To lexicography, accordingly, their attention was at once directed. Some progress

was also made in grammatical science; and the results were set forth in 1698, in a volume edited by the abbé Tallemant, and entitled 'Remarks and decisions of the French academy.'

The dictionary, however, from first to last, has been the *magnum opus* upon which successive generations of academicians have expended their force. Any one who has had a hand in the preparation of an elaborate index, catalogue, or vocabulary,—and such persons only,—can appreciate the labor of producing the dictionary of a language. For a single lexicographer to work alone, is almost futile; for him to work with co-ordinate assistants, is to multiply difficulties and questions almost in direct ratio to the number of helpers. One person can pronounce an opinion: how can a consensus be obtained in delicate matters of literary taste? We may even conjecture that it took forty times as long to produce the first edition of the dictionary on the democratic or equal-rights theory of production, which prevailed in this little republic of letters, as it would have done to produce it on a monarchic or military scheme of subordinated assistance. Was it forty times better? Even at this day, are there not many who think Littre's work far better than the latest edition of academic erudition?

Good or bad, the dictionary was of slow growth. It first appeared in 1694, in two volumes, folio. Frequent revisions have taken place, the earliest of which was begun in 1700, and published in 1718: the seventh and latest is now in progress, the first number having seen the light in 1858. Critics will vary in their estimate of the value of such a work, according to their conception of what is desirable in the dictionary of a living language. If an encyclopaedia is wanted of all the words employed by all the writers, early and recent, good and bad,—in all their uses, legitimate, obsolete, or colloquial,—including all possible derivatives, and the latest verbal inventions of technology, however barbarous,—then the dictionary of the academy will appear to be most inadequate and unsatisfactory. If, on the other hand, a standard of literary excellence is desired,—an authority to which a writer or speaker may refer if he questions the fit use of any part of speech or if he wishes to be exact and elegant in his diction, free from pro-

vincial or technical peculiarities in orthography, pronunciation, and the skilful adaptation of every word to its associates in the sentence,—then he will think that the deliberate opinion of a chosen body of literary men is far better than the *ipse dixit* of any one scholar; and he will value the collective opinion of an academy all the more highly because it is cautiously uttered.

We must not dwell too long upon this point, or we shall fail to notice other services of the academy. Its bestowal of prizes may be passed by as quite a subordinate function. Not so its election of members. To pronounce upon the comparative merits of those who are our neighbors and acquaintances, perhaps our near friends, and perhaps our annoying and troublesome rivals, is always a difficult task for the limitations of human nature. To select forty men from any great city who shall be regarded as the literary arbiters, the elect, the immortal, would be difficult if all were to be chosen at once: it may be even harder to make a selection when many candidates offer themselves for one vacant arm-chair. Probably no plan can be adopted which will work perfectly. Certainly, in politics, no plan has ever been devised for selecting invariably the best law-givers; in religion, the best ministers; in education, the best professors. Whatever the ultimate judgment of the world may be, contemporary opinion is always questionable. It is but the ordinary result of human action that the French academy has often withheld its recognition from those who seem to have been most worthy to receive it, and bestowed its honors on others of little worth. A recent writer quotes Boileau as saying, in a fit of bad humor, "What an admirable reunion of choice spirits that is, when la Bruyère, judging his illustrious colleagues *as posterity*, wonders at finding himself seated with a Bossuet, a Fénelon, a Racine, a Boileau, and a La Fontaine!"

Notwithstanding these imperfections in human nature, and the jealousies which they evoke, there are not many who will doubt that the bestowal of academic distinctions, with a reasonable amount of safeguards, tends to the development of literary ambition. The very highest genius undoubtedly rises above such accessory impulses. We can hardly imagine that Shakespeare, Goethe, or Tennyson would have written more or better with any hope of academic preferment; but, upon men of ordinary mould, recognition, and the hope of recognition, are stimulants whose tonic effect can be clearly perceived. There are few intellects so strong as to be indifferent to apprecia-

tion, and not many who prefer the estimate of posterity to the praise of their contemporaries.

A French wit, Arsène Houssaye, has printed a very bright satire on the academy elections, under the title of a history of the forty-first fauteuil. His keen and entertaining volume is free from malice, and full of suggestions on the actual working of an academy. The point of it is, to show, that, during a period of nearly two centuries and a half, there has been a succession of men of the highest talent, who, for one reason or another, failed to be registered among the 'immortals.' These overlooked worthies are considered as occupying the forty-first arm-chair. A series which begins with Descartes, and includes Pascal, Molière, La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, Rousseau, Diderot, Mirabeau, Lamménais, Beranger, Michelet, and George Sand, with twoscore more of the non-elect, is a series which may well illustrate either the failure of human purposes, or the triumph of human weaknesses. No wonder, with such a record, that the witty writer suggests for the frontal of the academy, *Aux dieux inconnus*. But this is not fair: Corneille, Racine, Fénelon, Colbert, Massillon, Voltaire, La Fontaine, Buffon, Laplace, Cuvier, Villemain, Guizot, Victor Hugo, St. Beuve, Thiers,—all of whom are among the elected immortals,—are not to be considered as unknown deities.

But, aside from all personal considerations, there remains a question, whether an organization, like the French academy, may not perform an important service to the country, by giving its collective authority to the encouragement of excellence in the use of language. May not its criticism of its own members, its judgment of works presented to it, its bestowal of academic honors, its election of associates, its public discourses, and its serious scrutiny of the vocabulary and phraseology of the language in their combined influence, be a very powerful agency in the promotion of literary excellence? May it not become a sort of schoolmaster to the nation, incapable of making good writers out of bad, but helpful in discipline? Who can tell what has been the net gain to France from such a society? Is the clearness, the precision, the symmetry, the finish, of a good French style worth having? What would the German language be to the world if there had been a German academy at work for two hundred and fifty years smoothing its roughness, and insisting upon clear, unencumbered, and pleasing forms of expression?